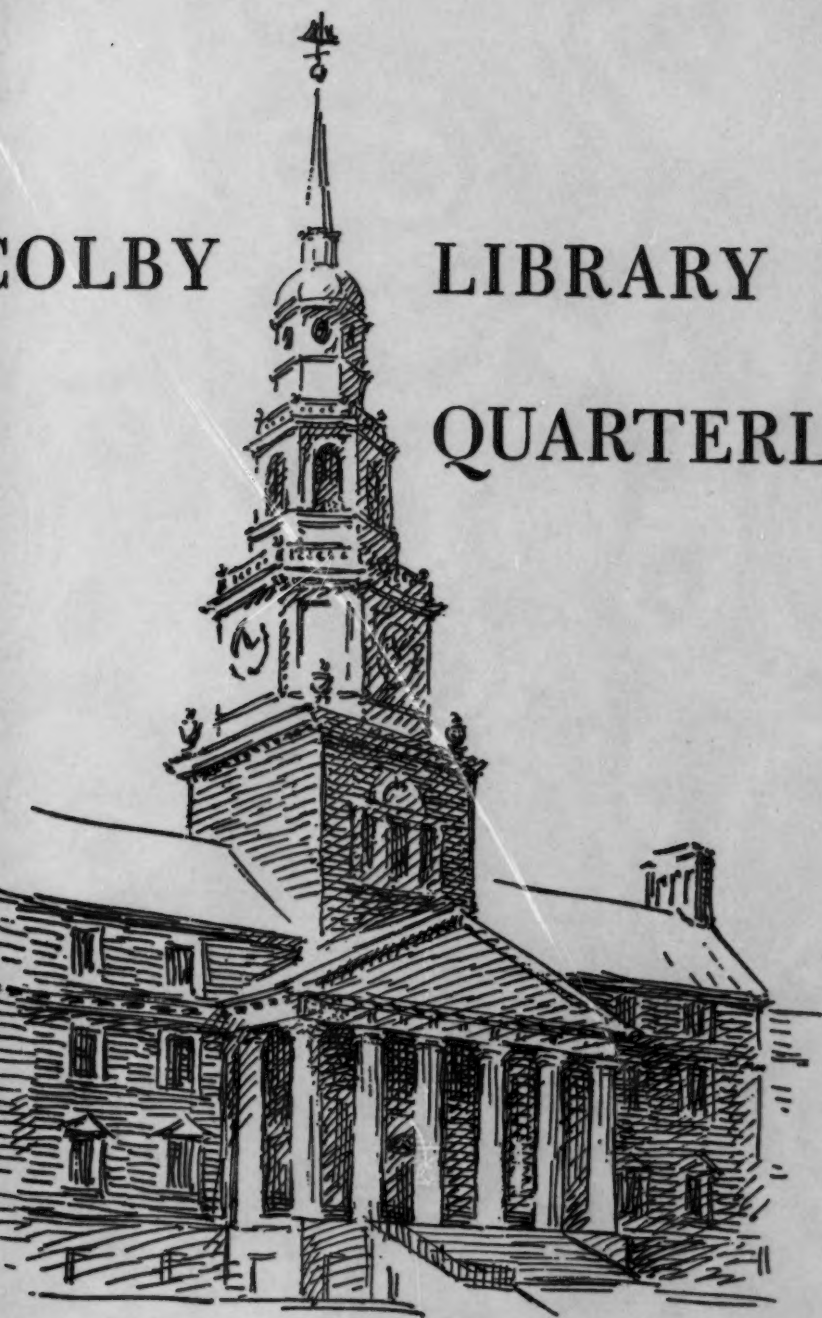


COLBY

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QUARTERLY



DECEMBER 1960

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## COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY

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This QUARTERLY is primarily interested in Maine authors (*i.e.*, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Jacob Abbott, Edna St. Vincent Millay) and in Maine history; also in authors from outside Maine (Henry James, Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, modern Irish writers, *et al.*) who are well represented by special collections in the Colby College Library or who touch on Maine life and letters.

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# Colby Library Quarterly

Series V

December 1960

No. 8

## IN MEMORIAM:

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

In 1920 and again in 1922 EAR pondered the probability of his literary survival a quarter-century after his death. The number 25 gripped his imagination and seemed to assume for him a magical connotation. If he could just manage to continue being read that long, he felt, his immortality would be assured. The first of two statements to his eldest niece—"I shall begin to live, if all goes well, about twenty five years after I'm dead"—exudes larger confidence than the second—"assuming that in another twenty five [years] my books are not as extinct as I shall be."

Twenty-five years have now elapsed since the poet passed on, and they have exposed him as a poor prophet. In the first place, his works never "died" to the point of having to "begin to live" again. In the second, he is most positively not "extinct."

The fame of the three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner has pulsed steadily through several shifts in literary taste since his time. Editions of his books and commentary on his vision and esthetic have appeared with abounding regularity. Constant inclusion of "Miniver Cheevy," "Richard Cory," "The Man Against the Sky" and "Flammonde" in academic and general anthologies have given them a familiar place alongside Poe's "To Helen," Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and Emerson's "The Rhodora" as indubitable short classics of American literature.

To the memory of Maine's most distinguished native poet and his perdurable accomplishment, this issue is dedicated.

## DOES IT MATTER HOW ANNANDALE WENT OUT?

*By* DAVID S. NIVISON

## I

IT is a critic's business to criticize a poet's work, not his intentions. What the poet intends, or has in mind, or is prompted by, is not only distinct in being from his poem—it is even in a sense irrelevant to it. The poet has his own emotion or experience, but in the poem, if he does well, he communicates it in such a way that it ceases to be distinctly his. He universalizes it, so that any sensitive reader may grasp the poem's meaning and appreciate its value without privy knowledge of the poet's personal history.

This view seems to me to present a paradox: it is both compelling and perplexing. It is compelling because in a way it restates our common conception of what language itself is for. And it is perplexing, not only because one occasionally stumbles over counterexamples which make one blush, but also because it seems perfectly natural, when we are trying to understand a poem or judge its effect, to ask at once what personal problem the poet was mulling over, what he was trying to say, and why.

To anyone unable to stop worrying about this puzzle the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson must be especially disquieting. Robinson sometimes assumes the role of narrator, and it is impossible to read such a poem as "Isaac and Archibald" and remain persuaded that the use of the first person is merely a formal device. Our impression is strong and persistent that his Tilbury Town is his home, Gardiner, Maine. He writes constantly of people. And, especially in the shorter poems, the people sometimes seem to us to be unusually real ones, not just successful characterizations but people the poet has known. Yet these characters stand on their own feet; the poems carry their own weight without any explanation of their background. It is difficult to see what would be accomplished by identifying the "real" Llewellyn or Mr. Flood, either for our understanding of these poems or for our evaluation of them.

And Robinson may well enough be talking about Gardiner when writing of Tilbury Town, in the sense of allowing his



memories to enrich or even to displace his imagination, without in any sense *referring* to Gardiner when he does this. If report be true, the poet himself has had his say about this matter. James Barstow, close friend of Robinson in Gardiner and later in New York, cites George Burnham, another Robinson intimate, as follows:

... Mr. George Burnham has just recently told me—and I quote him literally—that Robinson said to him with emphasis “that neither Tilbury Town, nor any of the portrait sketches, nor the ‘Town Down the River’ referred to any particular place. In no instance whatever in any of his writings did he refer to anyone or any place. Tilbury Town might be any small New England . . . town.”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Barstow and Mr. Burnham were men I knew well and respected highly. I do not doubt them; nor need we question Robinson’s disclaimer. But the matter is not quite as simple as this. The interesting question is not whether or not Robinson dealt with actual places and persons. For Robinson did not create his characters and scenes *ex nihilo*. A poet is a “maker;” but he is not this kind of maker.

A more meaningful question is this: must we, if we are to understand parts of Robinson’s work, know certain things about Robinson himself—the memories, friendships, regrets, experiences, which were part of his history and so part of himself—as he brings himself to the task of writing? And if understanding a poem requires this knowledge, must we count this a defect in the poem? Many would stand on doctrine and answer that we must. Nevertheless I think I can point to cases where having additional information about a poem not only enables us to understand it better but also shows us values in it we would otherwise have missed.

“Miniver Cheevy” is one of the most familiar of Robinson’s poems, familiar enough so that perhaps I need not quote it in full. Its popularity is puzzling, for I think very few understand it completely (although what I shall say is really quite obvious, and may have occurred to some; I myself owe the idea to my mother, Ruth Nivison). A pair of stanzas will start us:

Miniver sighed for what was not,  
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;  
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,  
And Priam’s neighbors.

<sup>1</sup> James S. Barstow, *My Tilbury Town* (Privately printed, 1939), 7.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown  
That made so many a name so fragrant;  
He mourned Romance, now on the town,  
And Art, a vagrant.

The poem is said to be one of Robinson's "character sketches." But Robinson's attitude toward this character cannot be matched elsewhere in his poems. Elsewhere we find deep sympathy and withheld judgment, as in "Bewick Finzer;" a constant sense that the human psyche conceals far more than we can ever have knowledge of, as in "Richard Cory;" a deep awareness of worth in apparent failure, as in "Flammonde;" and endless unanswered questioning, as we find even in "Llewellyn and the Tree," a poem Robinson manifestly enjoyed writing.

"When were thoughts or wonderings to ferret out the man within?" he asks in "Clavering." Still, Robinson is incurably thinking and wondering, and always asking us to do likewise. It is his way with his characters, and it must have been his way with his fellow men and with the world. But in "Miniver Cheevy" this trait of endless pondering is assigned to Miniver himself, and Robinson makes fun of him for it. Indeed, instead of sympathizing with his character and wanting us to ask what more there might be to say of him, Robinson laughs at him without reserve in every line, and leaves us with no compulsion to take him seriously or to go deeper into his make-up. His faults are lampooned with what we suspect is outrageous exaggeration. Even his harmless qualities and virtues, if he has them, are presented as absurdities. The poem is on the surface at least the opposite of serious; repeatedly we are entertained with what an unkind critic would call parlor-trickery (thus, "He missed the medieval grace/Of iron clothing").

In short, Robinson talks about Miniver as he could bring himself to talk about no other man, real or imaginary—except himself. And not even about himself, I think, except in the secure company of a group of intimate friends, and then only with a guarded wry remark or sly word. If we now reread the poem, we will see that if we make due allowance for exaggeration, what is said of Miniver is applicable to Robinson himself—even (for a season) the drinking part of it.

I do not mean that *Miniver* is, literally, E. A. Robinson. I do mean that before we can understand the poem adequately we have to ask who it was Robinson was thinking of, and how. The "how" is important. For Robinson very often projects himself into his poems, in various ways and in varying degrees. "Mr. Robinson . . . withholds himself and studies his fellows" wrote Robert Hillyer.<sup>2</sup> But, of course, one can't "withhold himself" completely if one is to study his fellows sympathetically. In "*Aunt Imogen*," for example, after assembling his character he had to imagine what it would be like to be such a person. And he found that to a surprising degree he *was* such a person. To this extent the method of the poem is self-explorative. But if there is self-exploration in "*Miniver Cheevy*" it is of a very different kind. Here, Robinson is not exploring the unknown in a human individual by turning inward. On the contrary, he has set up a fiction and has developed this fiction by talking about him as he sometimes feels like talking about himself. And, of course, he is having fun—but serious fun. It is almost as if he wanted to see how the total composition would turn out if he gave this impulse free run.

*Miniver*, in a word, is not a character but a travesty, and "*Miniver Cheevy*" is not a character sketch and was never intended to be. How was this understanding of the poem reached? No esoteric information about the poem was needed (for there isn't any to be had). Close reading was all that was needed—or almost all. We also needed some knowledge of the poet's personality, and of his typical method (in order to notice that it is *not* exemplified here) of dealing with human character. The needed knowledge can be gained by anyone from a reading of Robinson's published work, taking together both poems and letters. But it is knowledge about the poet nonetheless, and is something more than a reading of this poem alone can give.

If this much be true of "*Miniver*," we can well imagine that Robinson may have other poems which yield their meaning less readily, requiring of us information harder to come by. We might want to complain in such cases that the poet is play-

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<sup>2</sup> *New England Quarterly*, III (January 1930), 149.

ing a private game, that he is not playing fair. But it is best and fairest to leave this question until the cases come up. Meanwhile, what of "Miniver Cheevy" itself? Robinson is not exactly obvious about what he is doing in this poem. Does the poem, for all we have said about it, still merit censure for making unfair demands upon the reader?

It seems to me at least arguable that Robinson's privacy in what he is about in this poem is as much a virtue as a fault. Suppose he had let us in on the game at once, by entitling his poem not "Miniver Cheevy" but, say, "Self-Portrait." I think anyone will admit that this would have been grotesque (as well as not wholly accurate)<sup>3</sup>—and worse, would have displayed a gross lack of modesty. Robinson does talk in this way about himself in letters to close personal friends (letters he usually asked them to burn). Here he has done the same thing in a published work of art, and the same need for privacy exists. Perhaps we should say that if he were consistent he should have burned his own poem. But I for one am grateful that he didn't.

## II

I turn briefly to another example, less familiar and of a different kind. "Cortege," a poem of six four-line stanzas, is included in *Captain Craig* (1902). I do not know when it was written, but the extraordinary state of mind that produced it has a precise date. The poem has a surface meaning which is hardly difficult: two friends have died, their funeral is at hand, and the poem tells us how the poet feels about it.

But this much will satisfy scarcely anyone. And this time the widest reading of Robinson, coupled with the closest re-reading of the poem, will not remove all difficulty. It might be that more information about the poem would sustain what we see simply from careful reading. And it would still be possible to treat the poem as fictional—indeed if we take it literally it is necessary to do so.

Nonetheless the impact of the poem would be greatly augmented, for we would see that Robinson was impelled to write

<sup>3</sup> A much closer approach to a self-portrait is "Old King Cole," another pseudo-character-sketch.

it by the extraordinarily intense emotion of a permanent quality, rooted in an indelible chapter in his personal history. So intense is this emotion that fragments of the actual incident, irrelevant to the poem "itself"—or at least inexplicable except through an exercise of pure fancy by the reader—are still in place: "four o'clock this afternoon," "fifteen hundred miles away." These shattered pieces do, however, support the almost explicit suggestion of a despair close to distraction, at war in each stanza with reiterated and unconvincing philosophizing of the kind we find in "Leonora:" "Best for them the grave today." We may view the poem as fiction if we prefer, but as a release of personal feeling it is not play-acting.

It would be a mistake, perhaps, to say that the situation which moved him to write a given poem is even a part of what Robinson *intended* the reader to think of. Nonetheless "Cortege" shows that this situation and Robinson's involvement in it is sometimes so important to him as to overshadow anything apparent on the surface in the poem itself. It must be granted that Robinson could scarcely have hoped that a poem like "Cortege" would be fully understood by anyone except a few members of his family. He surely didn't care. Such poems are in his collected works because they are a part of himself, which he might let time destroy, but which he had to preserve as long as he could. They are like personal memories, so intimately a part of what one is that one must concentrate on holding on to them yet strive to conceal them. We must grant also the unlikelihood that Robinson would have acquired the stature he has if this kind of poem were all he produced. Still, some of this poetry is very moving, and many poems which are independently quite excellent can only gain in value, it seems to me, if we know more about them. I must apologize for saying no more of "Cortege" at this time except that it was conceived one black afternoon in late winter of 1890, when Robinson's brother and sister-in-law left Gardiner after their recent marriage (figurative death?) on the four o'clock train for St. Louis—fifteen hundred miles away.

## III

The sonnet "How Annandale Went Out" presents us with all of these complexities together and an additional one: in this case, other parts of Robinson's writing may actually *mislead* us.

To begin with, this poem is a fascinating example of a familiar problem in critical theory. Some (e.g., I. A. Richards) have tried to patch up the idea that a poem "is" what the reader makes out of it (regardless of what the poet's intentions were) by admitting that not just any reader, or just any reading, will do. The importance of the poet's connection with his poem is brought back into the picture by suggesting that the poet himself is one of its readers, and that for the authoritative reading of his poem we should take the poet's own review of it at the moment creation is finished, when, God-like, he looks upon his work and sees that it is good. One trouble with this theory is that the moment of review is, of course, a "specious present." And in Robinson's case, never in the folklore of metaphysics was the specious present more specious. Not only did Robinson in this instance reread and mull over his own work; he did so over many years, and he kept on creating as he reread.

He has given us not one but three "Annandale" poems, written in different forms, in different moods and at widely different times. "The Book of Annandale" is in blank verse, and takes up more than sixteen pages of the *Collected Poems*. It first appeared in *Captain Craig* in 1902, but it was begun earlier, and is in two parts surely not written at one sitting.<sup>4</sup> "How Annandale Went Out," a sonnet, was included in *The Town Down the River* in 1910. "Annandale Again," a poem of forty-seven quatrains, was first published in 1929, and was probably completed within a few years of that date.<sup>5</sup>

The first of these poems tells of George Annandale, of a book he wrote for his first wife without being able to show it to her before she died, and of the inner self-struggle of the woman who was to become his second wife. I believe (though

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1945), 195-211. In a letter to Harry DeForest Smith dated January 13, 1898, Robinson says that he "did 24 lines this afternoon beginning 'George Annandale'—a long thing in blank verse which is either good or bad." Denham Sutcliffe, ed., *Untriangulated Stars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 294.

<sup>5</sup> *Scribner's Magazine*, LXXXVI (August 1929), 129-134. One stanza seems to allude to an incident which must have occurred in Boston in 1922 or 1923.

I shall not press the matter here) that it is related to Robinson's personal history in the same way as is "Cortege"—non-referentially but as an intense emotional expression.

The sonnet is a monologue: a physician tells of attending a man named Annandale who is in some way fatally stricken and of ending his suffering, perhaps with a lethal injection.

#### HOW ANNANDALE WENT OUT

"They called it Annandale—and I was there  
To flourish, to find words, and to attend:  
Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend,  
I watched him; and the sight was not so fair  
As one or two that I have seen elsewhere:  
An apparatus not for me to mend—  
A wreck, with hell between him and the end,  
Remained of Annandale; and I was there.

"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;  
So put the two together, if you can,  
Remembering the worst you know of me.  
Now view yourself as I was, on the spot—  
With a slight kind of engine. Do you see?  
Like this . . . You wouldn't hang me? I  
thought not."

I see no indication other than sameness of surname that George Annandale and Annandale are the same person. The sonnet is a strange one. There is intensity here as well perhaps, but not the sustained psychological pressure of the earlier poem.

Robinson brings the two Annandales together as a single character in "Annandale Again." Clearly he was writing long after the composition even of the Annandale sonnet. The intense tone is now gone. The speaker is again the physician. Annandale appears at his door—"Almost as if my thought of him/Had called him from he said not where"—he might indeed, be an image arising in memory. The image speaks, however, recounting as his own story the story of George Annandale in "The Book," and dwelling affectionately on the character of his present wife. Then he leaves, and is at once struck down in the street by a moving vehicle. The physician goes to his aid and is present "to watch while Annandale went out." He then repeats his justification of his act in the sonnet:



"mine was the one light I had/To show me the one thing to do."

In "Annandale Again" we at last have the whole story—or so it seems. Robinson has taken the earlier fragments of the Annandale picture, fitted them together, and filled them out for us. But in doing so has he necessarily given us merely what was in his mind from the start? I do not see that we have any reason to assume this. What he often does in creating a poem is to present a few pieces of a poetic conception—pieces which could be fitted into a *number of different stories*—and then to suggest, cautiously and tentatively, the direction our search for an understanding of them should proceed. This is not a detective-story device. It places us in the situation we are in fact always in when we must appraise people and situations. In "The Whip" we have the method within the confines of a single poem: the speaker sees, ponders, begins to grope toward understanding, then leaves us, with a question, to go on ourselves to whatever end we can reach. In "Annandale Again" the poet takes the earlier Annandale poems and does himself—here it becomes his method of developing his fiction—what elsewhere he invites us to do.

But if this be the case we might do well to look again at "How Annandale Went Out" and ask if other stories can be built out of what it provides. There is one significant difference between the sonnet and the later poem which is on its face so trivial Robinson himself may not have noticed that he left it for us. "Annandale Again" is told directly in the first person. We do not, of course, take the "I" here to be in an exact sense the poet himself, though often in this manner of poem it is. "How Annandale Went Out" is also in the first person—but no, not quite! The whole poem is in quotation marks. This in itself might not be significant; for Robinson often has used the monologue device without quotation marks. But here the difference is important. In the later poem, the speaker is doing what Robinson so often does—pondering over the meaning of a story he has told insofar as he is able to tell it. In the earlier one, Robinson is exhibiting another man's self-defense—sympathetically; Robinson has accepted the defense and wants us to also. Nonetheless the tone of self-

justification makes the inverted commas a necessary part of the poem. We learn nothing of the ordinary "I" of Robinson's poems save that he is meditative, puzzles over things, is sympathetic, observing, withholding judgment. Even in "Annandale Again," where the "I" is a physician, his physicianhood scarcely intrudes itself. The "I" in "How Annandale Went Out," on the contrary, is a definite character whom Robinson portrays by allowing him to speak. Apparently in twenty years' time our physician has changed his identity.

There are other things about "How Annandale Went Out" which may make us wonder whether Robinson's own extrapolation of it is the best possible one. "A wreck, with hell between him and the end" and "I knew the ruin as I knew the man" might, with a stretch of language, apply to an accident victim, but it would be more natural to imagine the physician's patient as the victim of a wasting malady for which no help could be given. Likewise "I watched him" suggests a long-enduring situation, hardly an accident scene.

I want now to suggest a way of thinking about this poem which I think will be worth trying. Consider again carefully the lines—"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;/So put the two together, if you can,/Remembering the worst you know of me." Let us try making the physical "ruin" ("They called *it* Annandale"—but is this the real Annandale?), the (real) "man", and "me" not three persons, nor even two, but *one*. We would have in the poem the words of a dead man, a physician, who had been fatally ill, justifying his own act of self-destruction. In this poetic apologia, as perhaps psychologically in life also, physician and "wreck" are split apart. Suicide becomes merely treatment of a case; he did the reasonable, if socially unapprovable, thing to do. We may also guess that something else unnamed—perhaps the nature of the malady, which he found himself (*qua* physician and *qua* "man") helpless to control?—constrains him to separate himself as "man," as human character, from himself as powerless in will, as "ruin." Now re-read the poem, and notice the Beaudelairean word "hypocrite" in line three.

I am not quite sure whether what I offer here will pass as an *interpretation*. For the words, "there/To flourish, to find

words and to attend:" are altogether too easily taken as meaning just what they say: we know well enough how to recognize a doctor doing his job. It is an idea, however, which the poet seems almost to be expressing in spite of himself. Do we have here another case of a poem prompted by an actual incident—an incident developed by Robinson into a conception which on its face is fiction, but an incident which continued to have more of a hold on the poet's thought than the derivative conception he worked with?

Lawrance Thompson includes this poem in his selection of Robinson's verse entitled *Tilbury Town*, published in October 1953. He has a brief note on it, which reads, in part:

One particular example of "euthanasia" practiced by a doctor occurred in Robinson's own home; but with an ironic twist, in that it was self-inflicted. Robinson's brother Dean, who was a doctor, apparently used a needle to give himself a lethal "shot" of morphine, which was believed to have caused his death.<sup>6</sup>

Professor Thompson, perhaps wisely, refrains from drawing any inferences. However, if the line of thought I have suggested has proved at all tempting, this bit of family history ought to be of no little interest.

Horace Dean Robinson was twelve years older than his youngest brother. There are indications that the poet had a deep admiration and affection for him. In 1930 Robinson made a gift to the Gardiner General Hospital to equip a laboratory in Dean's memory. Details of "Captain Craig" reveal that Dean (along with Alfred Louis, an acquaintance) had much to do with the poet's conception of the "captain."

Dean, educated at Bowdoin Medical School in Portland, had started practicing in Camden. There, as the youngest member of his profession, he took the most arduous work, including frequent night calls to outlying islands. Vexed by excruciating sinus trouble and facial neuralgia, he began to relieve himself by imprudent self-medication. Presently he had become a drug addict. He returned to the family home in Gardiner, and his father bought him a drugstore, which kept him in morphine and deepened his addiction. He repeatedly

<sup>6</sup> Lawrance Thompson (ed.), *Tilbury Town* (New York, 1953), 140.

sought institutional treatment, but nothing could break the habit. He drifted gradually downward. For a time he served as city physician and was well enough to earn praise for his work. He later worked as an ice-cutter on the river. After the panic of 1893 and his brother Herman's business failures in St. Louis the family's financial situation was bleak and was becoming desperate. Dean's condition deteriorated; he was often bedridden and delirious, and from 1896 until his death the family had to engage an attendant to watch him.

Dean was fully aware of the burden he had become, and, both as a doctor and as an individual struggling helplessly with his addiction, he must have known the hopelessness of his case. On September 29, 1899, he died suddenly and from no apparent cause. Edwin was unwelcome at home because of a recent incident with his brother Herman, and had been living away from Gardiner for over half a year. He was quickly called back. My mother, then age 8, has written of this event as follows:

I remember vividly his sad pinched face lying in the casket, and the family arguing why and how he died. They decided that, realizing his plight, he had saved a little of each portion sent up from the store until he had accumulated a lethal dose. He was a Knight-Templar, and at his funeral the commandery marched in uniform to the "Dead March" in *Saul*.

Robinson left again at once.

The memory of his brother remained with him throughout his life, and with this memory a painful sensitivity about what others in Gardiner may have thought of Dean. When, in 1930, my mother suggested to him a memorial in the hospital, he took up the idea quickly, but expressed apprehension about how the proposal would be received. "I don't know anything about Gardiner now," he wrote, "but . . . it is barely possible that there are some who may not quite realize that Dean's unfortunate infirmities had no relation whatever to the fineness of his character. If he hadnt been so fine, he might be alive now and thriving."

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7 Quoted from an unpublished letter to Ruth Nivison, dated September 4, 1930, now at the Colby College Library.

Are we to identify the Annandale of the sonnet with Dean Robinson? Here we must recall the poet's earlier objections: he might well protest that he was not, literally, writing about anyone. We can respect this protest and still ask if Dean's death supplied Robinson with his theme, his attitude toward that event becoming the attitude which we detect in the poet behind the poem.

In the spring of 1953 I was invited by a friend to spend an evening with Dr. Merrill Moore, late Boston psychiatrist and writer of many sonnets. I soon found myself with a group of others in the midst of a lively discussion of sonnetry and psychiatry with Moore at the Boston Harvard Club. Moore had been an intimate friend of Robinson's and, though this was unknown to me, knew other members of the family.

The evening with Moore I shall never forget. Moore had a genuine light-hearted and unconcerned humility about his own work which would have drawn anyone to him. His enthusiasm for his craft was contagious, and his sympathy for all human beings was irresistible. He read sonnets, he talked about the art of the sonnet, and of the different and unusual tasks to which the sonnet form can be and has been put. In particular he called our attention to the use of the sonnet to tell a story.

At this juncture I spoke up, observed that even dramatic monologue could be found in sonnet literature, and cited, "How Annandale Went Out." Moore looked at me sharply. "That poem is about your Uncle Dean," he said. I was dumbfounded. The "inner" explanation of the poem, and with it the whole story of Dean's end, had been, I thought, a dark family secret. "What do you know about Dean?" I shot back. "Oh, your uncle (*i.e.*, Edwin) told me a lot about Dean," he answered; and that was all he would say. I thought at the moment that in respect for my own feelings he didn't wish to go into the matter before a large gathering.

But at a subsequent meeting alone with Moore a week or so later I was unable to get any more light from him on the matter. Did he have misgivings about having said boldly in so many words that the sonnet was *about* Dean? Had he perhaps once talked with Robinson about the poem, to find the conversation shift abruptly but somehow naturally to Robin-

son's brother, and then, familiar in his own work with a proximity between poetry and personal problems, made the identification of Annandale with Dean himself? Or did he sense in what Robinson had told him a reticence which, as a professional man accustomed to dealing with confidences, he felt still bound to respect? I shall never know.

I do know that it would not have been surprising for Robinson to have talked with Moore about Dean's case, and perhaps also about the case of his other brother Herman, who became an alcoholic after meeting with financial disaster. Both were "wrecks" in the eyes of the world. Both were men Robinson knew to be admirable. Both were elder brothers he had struggled with himself to analyze and justify. He could count on Moore's native human sympathy. And Moore must have been deeply interested. One of his principal professional interests in later years was the psychology of addiction.

I have one more detail to add, and this one too must end with a question. In 1931 Macmillan brought out a selection of Robinson's poems edited by Bliss Perry, professor at Harvard and for some years editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose acquaintance with the poet went back to 1902 when he had read the manuscript of *Captain Craig* for Houghton Mifflin and Co. Near the close of Perry's preface we find the following passage:

My function has been simply that of planning the contents of the book, and my pleasure in performing it is all the more keen because of the many sessions in which Mr. Robinson has generously given his approval of the choices made. Perhaps he will allow me to betray the secret that I have included one sonnet—impeccable in its art but *macabre* in theme—which he likes better than I do. But we drove a Yankee bargain over it, with the result that the reader now gets two additional sonnets for which the author's enthusiasm seems less warm than mine. I think that I—and the reader—have the better of this trade, but I wisely refrain from giving the titles of the sonnets under discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Now here is a puzzle! What is this sonnet "impeccable in its art but *macabre* in theme" which the poet would not give up despite his editor's uneasiness?

Of the twenty-six sonnets included in *Selected Poems*, I find not a few which could fitly be judged impeccable in art, but

<sup>8</sup> Bliss Perry (ed.), *Selected Poems* (New York, 1931), vii-viii.



only two, I think, which qualify as *macabre* in theme. These two, I suggest, are "Haunted House" (pp. 298-299) and "How Annandale Went Out" (p. 293). "Haunted House" is indeed chilling.<sup>9</sup> Still, I find it difficult to see what there might be in it that would have given Professor Perry such pause. "How Annandale Went Out" is another case entirely. It deals approvingly with euthanasia, and perhaps also with suicide; and Perry, I fear I must recall, was a member of the Boston Watch and Ward Society! And it is extremely—well, realistic. One can almost feel the needle—"Like this . . .!" One can only guess what the offending poem was, but I find it fascinating to speculate that Robinson may have insisted on the presence of the Annandale sonnet in the selection, possibly without being able to bring himself to own his own motives.

For if what I have said of it has any justification, "How Annandale Went Out" is like "Cortege"—so important to the poet that it was almost a part of his being, to be guarded as though it were a piece of himself. It is more accessible than "Cortege." We need no privileged information to make sense of it, indeed, to make sense of it in different ways. And perhaps Robinson intended us to have this multiple possibility of interpretation. He may even have preferred to have us take the obvious choice, of seeing in it simply a doctor's account of his dealing with a patient. The obviousness of this interpretation is perhaps a needed disguise—just as "Miniver Cheevy" needed to be at least thinly disguised—protecting the privacy of the poem's associations for Robinson himself.

Still I do not think we would want to miss the opportunity to consider the alternative I have suggested; psychologically it seems to me to be far richer. And I feel we are poorer if we are unable to consider what this poem meant to Robinson, its intimate connection with a painful memory, a case in his own life and family of that problem which always absorbed him, of worth in apparent failure, of the man enduring through the ruin. For at the level to which criticism must rise in Robinson we deal with more than just the poem; we deal with the poet as well. Criticism is more than just an esthetic-semantic prob-

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<sup>9</sup> But I will not force upon the reader the experience it will give him; it is found in *Collected Poems*, p. 870.



lem having to do with words, and with meanings which are attributes of words—it becomes a moral problem of judging attitudes, which are the attributes of a man.

In a sense, however, it does not matter how Annandale went out. What matters is the kind of question Robinson put to the event. Here in life he was confronted with the problem which is presented in poem after poem, of a human enigma in which we must learn to accept that we must remain in ignorance and doubt. The physician is not telling us what happened—he is saying what Robinson conjectures he might have said could we ask him. For no one knows how Annandale went out, really. Except, perhaps, Annandale himself.



## MOODY AND ROBINSON

By MAURICE F. BROWN

ON May 8, 1898, William Vaughn Moody wrote from Chicago to Daniel Gregory Mason in Cambridge, "Note what you say of Robinson with interest. Do not know his work. Wish you could get me a line of introduction from some friends."<sup>1</sup> Mason's eventual introduction of the two poets began a friendship, important to the careers of both, which lasted until Moody's death in 1910. Biographers and critics, with the exception of Hermann Hagedorn, have tended to shy away from the thorny problems involved in speculation on the nature and impact of the relationship.

There is some difficulty in understanding why Moody might have been interested in knowing Robinson: differences in their characters and poetic aims are so striking they would seem to make any kind of friendship impossible. Moody, the Midwesterner, was spontaneous and emotional, "florid and careless" in dress, with a "barbaric taste for magnificence in waistcoats,"

<sup>1</sup> From a letter in the Princeton University Library. Published by permission of the Library and William Vaughn Moody Fawcett.

according to Mason, while Robinson tended to be quiet and self-conscious. Robinson's sensitivity to the potential misery and the quiet ironies of human experience were balanced by Moody's buoyant enthusiasm and his love of the grand and the dramatic. Although both of Moody's parents had died while he was still in high school, he escaped the agony which pervaded the slow disintegration of Robinson's family in the nineties.

Similar oppositions of poetic interest and aim are obvious in these two young poets. Robinson's early circle, dominated by Alanson Tucker Schumann and Caroline Swan, while it had turned him to practice in late Victorian poetic forms, had drawn him to seek subjects in his own experience and the world around him. And Schumann's example had developed in Robinson a taste for simplicity and precision in the use of words. Moody's Harvard circle had been one of young enthusiasts in search of rare words and brave worlds of Pagan release from the curse of Philistinism. Moody's subjects and language were drawn from literature itself, and no poems before 1895 drew on personal experience. Where Robinson understated, Moody overstated. Where Robinson found pathos or irony, Moody found vibrant passion or heroic drama. Where the surface of Robinson's poetry was matter-of-fact, that of Moody's was richly sensuous or emotional. Where Robinson's diction was plain, Moody's was luxuriant.

Something of the contrast in underlying poetic aim can be seen by juxtaposing passages from letters of the mid-nineties in which the two poets comment on their work. Moody replied to an objection to his diction by Mason, asking for tolerance of his "instinct for conquest in language, the attempt to push out its boundaries, to win for it continually some new swiftness, some rare compression, to distill from it a more opaline drop." Both the desire expressed and the style of the expression here differ significantly from the prosier statement Robinson made to Arthur Gledhill shortly before the publication of *The Torrent and The Night Before* (1896). If, as Denham Sutcliffe maintains, Robinson blows "no self-conscious trumpets of rebellion"—Robinson was, I think, more attracted to clarinets anyway—the poet is certainly aware of the extent of his rebellion in this passage:

When it comes to 'nightingales and roses' I am not 'in it' nor have I the smallest desire to be. I sing in my own particular manner, of heaven and hell and now and then of natural things (supposing they exist) of a more prosy connotation than those generally admitted into the domain of metre. In short I write whatever I think is appropriate to the subject and let tradition go to the deuce.<sup>2</sup>

Robinson is reacting against the late Victorian modes of poetry, or at least against their subjects, not with an appeal to the longer English poetic tradition but to "natural things" of a "prosy connotation." His statement indicates what a study of his early poetry and letters reveals—that Robinson's major impetus to "prosy" subjects and the diction of speech came through his voluminous reading in the French and English novel. Moreover, in comments on Daudet, Hardy, Collins, Carlyle, and Shakespeare, Robinson is concerned with definition of paradoxical minglings of humor with the "grim" or "dark" subject—the characteristic mood of many of his poems. While Robinson was so occupied, Moody was searching the English poetic tradition for guidance in his practice.

The passing of years, however, have obscured those elements in the poetry of both Moody and Robinson which made for the community of interest on which their association as poets rested. Obviously the classical revival of the late nineteenth century was important to the work of both—though in different ways—and the American cultural heritage, religious, moral, and poetic, helped produce similarities of outlook and concern. More immediate to the relationship, however, was Moody's growing interest in life around him. In 1895 he left the "elegaic air" of Cambridge for Chicago. The shock of the raw, bustling, immigrant city was immediate. He became concerned with social and political issues and began to work with material "from 'real' life," writing to Mason, "I have theories about that." He saw his Harvard existence as "theatrical," and his life in the east as "a sort of tragi-farce, more or less consciously composed." Moreover, Moody was in a position to appreciate Robinson's achievement in diction and rhythm at least as early as January 1899. At work on a prose play, he wrote Mason:

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<sup>2</sup> Ridgely Torrence (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 13.

I found myself embarrassed a good deal at first by the dull monochromatic medium of everyday speech, but am getting more used to it now and find that when you do get an effect in it it is more flooring than anything to be got with bright pigments.<sup>3</sup>

There is, on the other hand, much of the temper of the nineties in Robinson. It has been passed over briefly by critics, first, in the interest of his more attractive affiliations with twentieth century poetic practice, and more recently in the concern with Robinson's strong roots in English literary tradition. In at least half of Robinson's poems of the nineties, forms and techniques Moody was employing are to be found. Here are the familiar ballades and sonnets of the late Victorians, the occasional *fin de siècle* tone, some use of Pre-Raphaelite symbolism, sharp tonal contrast, syntactical inversion, an addiction to the adjective, and a reliance on rhetoric in preference to image. While Robinson experiments with colloquialism in three or four poems—among them, "Fleming Helphenstine," which Moody praised—Robinson, both in the nineties and throughout his career, generally followed Schumann's chaste injunction against prostitution of style to contemporary slang. His preference was for simple but "good English." Throughout this period, Robinson tends to depend on medieval romance for his imagery, and he has, of course, already established his characteristic simple cluster of Light-Dark symbols. There is often use of themes popular in the nineties as well. In a poem like "The Night Before," Robinson, somewhat unexpectedly, writes a passionate monologue. And he was, unhappily, dabbling in Herbert Spencer and discussing idealism and mysticism in the Quadruped meetings.<sup>4</sup> He catches the "transcendental manner" of the period in his pseudo-philosophical poems, which depend for their effect on vaguely-expressed faith, on the evasive but "big" emotional idea, on the contemplation of "the crater of the Scheme," "Thought's prophetic endlessness," "life's wide infinity," and so forth.

The association of Robinson and Moody, supported then by certain mutual poetic concerns, found in 1899 its locus in

<sup>3</sup> Daniel G. Mason (ed.), *Some Letters of William Vaughn Moody* (Boston, 1913), 107-108.

<sup>4</sup> "The Quadruped" was the name by which Robinson and three of his Gardner friends of the mid-nineties identified themselves. See Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 92-94 and *passim*.

New York City. Robinson was attracted to "the biggest conglomeration of humanity and inhumanity that America affords," and Moody, as early as 1898, recognized New York as "the place for young Americans who want to do something." By 1902 both poets had written friends—somewhat imperceptively—that New England was out of their blood. Their New York relationship, as reconstructed from letters to each other and to friends, was marked by mutual admiration, which was accompanied by a touch of envy on Robinson's part and rendered uneasy by differences in personality and attitude to poetry. The early tone of the friendship received its awkward twist from Robinson's Harvard experience. There is no record of a meeting at Harvard in the early nineties, but Robinson knew of Moody. Moody—a regular student on a large scholarship, a junior who was famous for his unprecedented election as a freshman to the elite undergraduate literary magazine, *The Monthly*—was successful, popular, and confident. Robinson was an insecure special student who worried over grades constantly and unsuccessfully attempted to gain acceptance by the Harvard *literati*. The spirit of naive awe with which Robinson contemplated Moody's literary circle is painfully evident in a mistake in his letter of December 8, 1891, to Harry de Forest Smith. Robert Morss Lovett, editor of *The Monthly*, called on Robinson. As the young poet recounts the visit, he inadvertently substitutes for Lovett's name that of Eliot, Harvard's president! In another letter (May 9, 1892) Robinson describes watching the class games to Smith, adding, "It was good fun at first, but I soon sickened of [it]. Men like W. V. Moody and R. M. Lovett seemed to enjoy it, however, so I am probably at fault."

Although Robinson grew more sure of himself, little had happened between 1892 and 1900 to change his attitude. In his letters of the first years of the friendship, there is frequent direct or implied comparison of himself and Moody. Robinson gravitates between suspicion that he is "probably at fault" and criticism of Moody. Moody's success as a poet using a diction of which Robinson disapproved was disconcerting. The inability to be successful on the world's terms, a frequent concern for Robinson, breaks through in a reference to Moody's "additional gift of chronic ability to make a living." Robinson

shows insecurity about his lack of a college education as he calls mocking attention to Moody's knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, a course Robinson dropped at Harvard. But, he writes friends, Moody's scholarship is in his way, and "he has so many things to unlearn." Robinson was torn between admiration and aloof disapproval of Moody's personality. In one letter to Josephine Preston Peabody he writes of Moody "with his Temperament," and in the next points out his own advantage in "not having a temperament." Robinson felt Moody's lack of sensitivity to the sorrow in life and lashed out at the immaturity of "Von Moody, the pessimist man-child," who "with all his pre-digested experiences is not yet more than half so old as he thinks he is." Yet in the same letter he tells John Hays Gardiner that Moody is "one of the most human and attractive of mortals."

Robinson's early comments on Moody's poetry give an agonizing glimpse of confused ambivalence in attitude. He found *The Masque of Judgment* "an astonishing work of art and almost flawless in construction," and he liked Moody's way of "making laddered music spring skyward from prophets' pillows," telling Mason that Moody had "the God-given bulge, so to speak." Letters to Moody himself move from extravagant praise to aggressive attack. Robinson criticizes and later apologizes, explaining that his attitude was based on hasty reading. There is praise of Moody's "Ode," yet Robinson is suspicious of poetry of grand scope. He finds "too much billiard-work with the western world," and feels Moody shows self-consciousness in search of the commonplace at one point. In "Gloucester Moors," Robinson finds "occasional and obnoxious use of archaic monstrosities." One passage is "too 'creative'—not to say feminine and illogical," while another seems "a trifle sophomoric." He tentatively observes that "perhaps there is too much color and not enough light" in Moody's work, and the color he finds is purple, which has "a mortal smell." Praise of Moody's "The Daguerreotype" takes on the characteristic tone when Robinson writes that the poem has convinced him that Moody's "private little hell with purple curtains and fountains running beer ['wine' was written and crossed out] is not, and has never been" Moody's "proper dwelling place." Robinson's aggressiveness transcends the limits of even close

friendship, and a letter of May 1901 indicates the extent of his confusion. After a tortured passage that treads unsteadily between harsh criticism and praise, Robinson writes unhappily that he has enjoyed Moody's acquaintance, but that perhaps he won't see much of Moody in the future. The result of this wrestling with Moody's poetry comes in a letter of July 7, 1901, to Mason. Robinson writes,

I am simply incomplete and made up as far as I am made at all of what must have been left over after the manufacture of some 16 or 17 fellows who were more fortunate perhaps than I am. By this description, if by no other, I am a man of parts—some of them pretty little, and none of them fastened together very well. This is where Moody is big while I am small. He can do the world's work for the admirable reason that he has a brain.<sup>5</sup>

Moody seems to have understood Robinson's character and conflict, and this understanding kept the friendship from floundering. His answer to a letter from Robinson praising his masque expresses surprise, which he explains:

I thought in New York that you were bravely trying to be generous (you would have said 'just') toward a thing you rootedly deplored but suspected yourself of being by nature prejudiced against.<sup>6</sup>

He continues, accepting what he says he now recognizes as Robinson's clear and considered opinion. Moody's early attitude to Robinson's work is expressed in a simple statement to Mason—one which very few would have made or even understood in 1901. Moody commented on Robinson's praise and concluded, "Well, he can afford to be generous."

There are only a few letters after Moody's final move from Chicago to New York in 1902. The eight years to follow brought a growing friendship and an easier relationship, although one might wonder how much part the constant comparison of himself with the more successful Moody might have played in Robinson's despair through 1904. In 1902 we find Moody joining others to praise to Houghton-Mifflin the volume that eventually became *Captain Craig*. In 1904 and 1905 we glimpse Robinson and Moody dining together occasionally, talking "over the coffee and cigars," and watch-

<sup>5</sup> *Selected Letters*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Some Letters*, 136-137.



ing the election returns together until dawn. In 1905 Moody played a part in Roosevelt's preferment of Robinson, and in 1906 Moody "gathered in Robinson and Torrence for a celebration" after signing a contract for the production of *The Great Divide*. Robinson immediately caught "the dramatic fever acutely," and an ill-fated period devoted to play writing, reading, and theatre-going with Ridgely Torrence, Percy MacKaye, and Moody ended in the rejection of Robinson's *The Porcupine*, in spite of Moody's aid. Yet even with increasing rapport and the relaxation of Robinson's tensions, the personalities of the two poets clashed at times. Moody, recovering from a serious bout with death, wrote MacKaye in 1907 that the doctors were becoming optimistic. He continued,

The blow of disillusion will fall sharpest upon poor Robinson who has taken a final farewell of me, and no man likes less than he to have his arrangements discomposed, especially when they are of a gloomy character. We must rally round him and lend the needed support at this trying juncture.<sup>7</sup>

Moody's humor here takes on something of an edge.

On Moody's death in 1910, Robinson wrote to MacKaye, "Well, he did enough to give him his place among the immortals, and I believe he did no man an injury while he lived." The tribute to Moody, the man, is a fine one, yet in the "he did enough" one feels the disappointment of Robinson's fondest hopes for Moody. Moody was to have grown up someday and written like Shakespeare, "or maybe like a new Ibsen without smoky spectacles." And Robinson had written that he didn't expect to hear Moody's "real voice" until the fourth or fifth book. Had he heard that voice, or was he unable to shake off the suspicion that Moody was too much one of the many "pensioners of dreams" and "thirsting heirs of golden sieves that held not wine or water" produced by the nineties? Perhaps he wasn't quite sure himself. Moody's best-known comment on Robinson was made to Ridgely Torrence, and if casual, it was probably honest as well: "When we're all dead and buried, EA will go thundering down the ages."

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<sup>7</sup> From a letter in the Princeton University Library. Published by permission of the Library and William Vaughn Moody Fawcett.

The most obvious effect of the friendship is the aid Moody gave Robinson in entering cultured and literary circles in New York. And there was, throughout the relationship, a certain championship of Robinson by Moody, although it was not crucial to Robinson's career and he had other, and more effective supporters in Gardiner and Mrs. Richards. Neither Robinson nor Moody was essentially changed by the friendship, but early impulses in the personalities and poetry of the two men were certainly strengthened by their acquaintance.

Robinson's example and dicta encouraged Moody to greater experiment with the immediate subject drawn from life and with simpler diction. After meeting Robinson, Moody again took up his prose play, *The Faith Healer*, which had been put aside for four years. Robinson's success with colloquialism must have stimulated Moody's experimental "The Menagerie." And Moody sometimes worked in an idiom that sounds very Robinsonian in a passage like this one from "Until the Troubling of the Waters":

. . . The bitterest thought  
Of all that plagued me when he came was this,  
How some day he would see the difference,  
And drag himself to me with puzzled eyes  
To ask me why it was. He would have been  
Cruel enough to do it. . . .

Yet, if Moody sought a simpler prose movement in his lines after the turn of the century, it had to be "capable of gathering itself up, when needed, into the passion and splendor which prose is incapable of." Moody, indeed, retained a distrust of realistic tenets to the end, telling an actress who asked him to transfer his *Eve* play to a contemporary setting that he "didn't intend to expose it to cobwebs and museum shelves by putting Adam in creased trousers and Eve into glove-fitting etcetera."

Robinson's work shows little continuing interest in the experimentation which absorbed Moody throughout his career. Exceptions can be found in Robinson's Napoleonic monologue and "The Man Against the Sky," where he experiments with the neo-Miltonic verse Moody used in "The Daguerreotype." Perhaps the lack of reaction to Moody's generally skillful use of rhythm and sound must be located in what Yvor Winters

identifies as "a certain deficiency in Robinson's ear, which results at times in a somewhat mechanical and imperceptive rhythm . . . and a distrust of the suggestive power of language in favor of an unnecessary fullness of expository statement."<sup>8</sup> Robinson's "distrust of the suggestive power of language" affects his imagery to the extent that there is little change in its function or sources after 1900, and he used imagery less and less frequently as a major vehicle for poetic communication. Moody could have helped Robinson to an increasingly subtle symbolism as well, but Robinson preferred to perfect his own subtle and effective use of Christian and classical reference in contemporary contexts. The most one can say is that there is greater security in Robinson's handling of the grand manner after 1902, though the manner itself was used in his early poetry.

At the same time, Moody's interest in social and political themes, his "billiard-work with the western world," and his success with "the big thing," had an undoubted impact on Robinson's work. While Robinson generally—and wisely—resists the temptation to follow Moody into philosophical probings, a new breadth of theme comes in 1910 with *The Town Down the River*, which included poems on Lincoln, Napoleon, and Roosevelt. Robinson's break-through with *Merlin* in 1917 finally opened the path to success in the long poetic narrative based on traditional material. Early attempts at the long poem had been made, and Robinson's interest in large literary forms was not new. Indeed, his past was strewn with his trials from "The Night Before" to the unsuccessful dramas and novels based on them. If Robinson's desire to write big works, combined with Moody's successful example, led him to a form which magnifies his greatest shortcomings—his deficient sense of drama and his prolixity—the form also provides a larger arena for display of Robinson's strengths—his sensitivity to complex states of being, his sympathy with human suffering, his keen sense of irony, and his ability to catch life in a net of words.

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<sup>8</sup> Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1947), 147.

## ROBINSON'S NOTES TO HIS NIECES

By RICHARD CARY

UNLESS a man is lucky in his biographers, his actual personality tends to blur as decades pass and to take on attributes suitable to particular theses. Twenty-five years after his death, Edwin Arlington Robinson has acquired an image, variously compounded, of atheist, pessimist and misanthrope. One must hasten to add that this inclement impression is due as much to misreadings of his poetry as to the fault of biographers. Of the three, one attempted no extensive inquiry into Robinson as man, one was perhaps too maternally uncritical, and one motivated by what seems to be unconscious envy. In the long run, it is Robinson who has given us the best portrait of himself—and this not deliberately—through the medium of letters written during the hurly-burly of a life devoted to producing over two thousand pages of poetry and drama. Into these often hasty notes he poured his unpremeditated self, for he was sincere in hating the letters of an anonymous colleague which “read as though he had written them for posterity.”

In the manuscript files of Colby College Library are sixty-five notes which Robinson wrote to his three nieces<sup>1</sup> over the span of twenty-four years, 1912-1935. His brother Herman's three daughters (Ruth, Marie, Barbara) were all the family Robinson had. Hagedorn states that “the family was his base, the tie that bound him to the human race, giving him, above all, spiritual support.”<sup>2</sup> Laura E. Richards, friend and neighbor for years, attests that “he loved the nieces, I think, more than anything in life.”<sup>3</sup> And the frolicsome atmosphere of their sporadic meetings in Gardiner was there for all to see.

Few of these notes run over a page in length; all are plainly phrased and deal with the unextraordinary commerce and intermittent turbulence that mark the cycle of normal family his-

<sup>1</sup> To Ruth, later Mrs. William Nivison, fifty notes (one a typed transcript); to Marie, later Mrs. Arthur T. Legg, now deceased, thirteen notes (one an exact copy, one a typed transcript); to Marie and Barbara, later Mrs. Harold Holt, two notes.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 125. One wonders why he saw fit to contradict this later by opining that “at bottom” the poet was detached from his family.

<sup>3</sup> Laura E. Richards, *E. A. R.*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 59.

tory. But for all that, there emerge from these brief, unstudied messages—to greater degree and acuity than in the biographies—at least five integral qualities of Robinson's character.

1. *His instinctive, unobtrusive generosity to his own family.*

The annals of art, music and literature are pocked with instances of abuse, extortion and abandonment of nearest kin by gifted egocentrics. Whether the ultimate results justified this unlovely behavior is a socio-esthetic argument beyond the scope of this paper. The fact is that Robinson was no such self-intoxicated savage. The affairs of his family, though often distasteful to him, touched him always to the marrow. Of uncertain financial sinew throughout his early years of poetizing, he nevertheless did not miss a Christmas gift of apposite books or a check to each of his little favorites and to their mother (who persistently refused to cash a single one).

He was aware of shoddy shoes, and psychoanalysts can be endlessly ingenious about his penchant for expensive footwear when finally he could afford it. After Ruth's departure for her first reunion at Bradford Junior College in a pair of patched oxfords, he wrote her:

I worried a good deal over your going to Bradford with those shoes, but as it was too late then for me to do anything, I had to let you go as you were and trust to your personality and general excellence to overcome your temporary pedal defects. I am sending five dollars with this, trusting that you may discover some use for it. (July 25, 1913).

When Ruth volunteered to help raise a fund of \$1000 to establish a laboratory in Gardiner Hospital as a memorial to his hapless brother Dean (see pages 180-182), Robinson insisted on two points: (1) that he contribute the entire sum; (2) that his name be kept in the background. And in the parlous days of the Depression, despite his having "recently received a rather bad financial jolt" himself, he offered Mrs. Nivison a far larger amount to float her over current shoals. (July, August, September 1933).

Of his two grandnephews, William and David Nivison, he was equally solicitous. During the fall and winter of 1930 he continually tried to ease the burden of doctors' bills ("I am sending the enclosed in the hope that it will make at least a

dent in them.”), and to underwrite the costs of a private school in Augusta for David (“. . . if you will let me know the price of tuition. I should like to do something—either that or some of your hospital bills.”). He sent the boys stamps out of his own collection and did all in his power to encourage their progress in music—“I can remember how hard a small boy can want things.” “So please use this for their musical instruction and let me know when it has run out.” He sought their preferences in piano music—“maybe Beethoven’s sonatas or something”—and sent along “a lot of dusty music” which he turned up in old bookshops. Once, piquantly, he asked if he could “send any music (not four-hand or second-hand) that they happen to want.”

Impulsive in his liberality, he felt a frequent need to disavow it. “For heaven’s sake dont talk about returning that money, or I shall swear so loud that you will hear me without any radio. I was very glad to be of a little use [April 2, 1931].” And again on January 4, 1933: “My only idea was to give the boys a small bust. They couldnt go to hell with what I sent them—or very far with their music with what I sent to you.”

## 2. *His fundamental modesty and self-effacement.*

“Win was always in the background,” said Emma Robinson, his brother’s wife. He was slow to assert his opinion, quick to retract if it seemed discordant, and tremulous about imposing himself upon anyone. He was distressed when one of his intimates, Josephine Preston Peabody, used her professional influence in behalf of his oft-rejected *Captain Craig*. He spurned the kind of publicity that might advance his fortunes with the general reader. In 1913 he chilled a reporter from the *Boston Post* with: “I have nothing to say about myself. My poems speak for themselves.”

Robinson could not, in his own eyes, erect himself to a sufficient stature. “I don’t think of anything new to say as to myself except that I’m a little older and not much wiser—so far as I can see,” he wrote retrospectively to Ruth on the last day of 1927. And two years later he confessed to Marie: “I was going to ask you and Barbara to have dinner with me in town before I left, but I kept telling myself that it would be only a

bore and a big nuisance for both of you. . . . You may tell me that I was wrong, but I suspect that I'm right."

He belittled himself consciously but without drama. On June 3, 1920, he entreated Marie: "I hope that sometime when you have nothing better to do you will write me another letter;" the same day he was deploring his small vanity to Ruth: "[Your present] was very welcome, though it humiliates me somewhat to learn that you are still so lenient toward my many shortcomings as to work my initials into two handkerchiefs. I am really very grateful—whether you believe it or not."

He sidestepped the limelight on the occasion of Dean's memorial. "You are surely tactful enough to do this without putting me forward in any important way," he advised Ruth. He congratulated himself wryly during the "wicked times" of 1933 that "there are still invisible people who read blank verse." And when Ruth invited him to come and live in her Gardiner home on Dresden Avenue—she had prepared a room exclusively for his use—he could not bring himself to discompose that household. "So please don't consider me at all, but do as you would if I were dead or had never been born, and be sure at the same time that I am very grateful to you for having me in your mind." (January 1, 1930).

In connection with this house, however, he did request one small favor the next month, meanwhile reducing his own substantial rank to a cipher. "If there is an attic in it (as there should be) you may use it as a place to keep the set of my books described in Mr. Latham's letter." He is referring to the five-volume Dunster House edition of his poems published by Macmillan in 1927, a gigantic stride forward in public prestige by any calculation—except his own. What ninety-nine others would conspicuously display, he relegates to the lumber room.

Perhaps the slightest but most indicative clue to his organic reticence is the postscript he scribbled in the right margin of his letter to Marie on May 2, 1929: "This giant paper isn't mine." Although larger than he customarily used, this stationery is less than 6 x 8 by a quarter-inch all around—not by any ordinary standard "giant." Robinson's feeling of grossness, of extrusiveness, was compatible, however, with his psychic world. He was at home with the contained, the un-



flamboyant. His minuscule handwriting suited a smaller sheet; 5 x 6 or less was his choice. He experienced acute discomfort in the grandiose, as John Hays Gardiner learned when he suggested trying to secure him a teaching post at Harvard. Kneading his brow reflectively, the poet disclaimed qualifications for so exalted a position but declared that he *could* rake the college yard.

3. *His sober wit and moderated pessimism.*

One of Robinson's grade-school teachers remarked that he was "quick to observe the humor in everything," but even as a boy he was not given to robust laughter. Through the years he displayed a deep-grained and self-deprecatory sense of the comic, which he announced to the valiant few who ventured to open his first book: "This book is dedicated to any man, woman or critic who will cut the edges of it—I have done the top."

He could make pungent fun of his amateur musicianship. "The nearest I ever came to making music was an awful noise that I used to draw out [of] a clarinet or a fiddle. I learned when it was all over that the clarinet could never have been played by anybody. You may remember that the old black cat used to make a dive out of the room before I could open the drawer that held the instrument."<sup>4</sup> To his added mortification he discovered later that, craftily, the cat had gone deaf.

Usually he qualified his Christmas gifts to the girls with some astringent aside: "Here is a microscopic remembrance for you. You cant buy a motor car with it, but you may be able to get something nourishing for the cat." Or: "Anyhow you can give her the check and tell her to spend it in riotous living." Or: "Here is another Christmas card with which you may buy rum and jewels."

He could apply tongue to cheek with the precision of a Mark Twain and the innocence of a born Down-Easter. "I haven't had any lumbago since taking Dr Legg's spine straightening exercises and wearing a Jaeger belt. I knew of a man who bought a Jaeger belt and never had any more lumbago. So I bought one." (May 8, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> This note to Ruth is undated.

And he could swerve as agilely as a squirrel streaking up a tree. "The whole business [*Collected Poems*, 1929] is coming out in the fall in one volume of about a thousand pages, which will prove that I must have done some work at one time or another."

But, more often, Robinson's humor was grimmer, of the sort that earned him the undeserved toga of pessimist. He relished the paradox of his existence, which he described to Laura E. Richards. "By nature I am jovial and sunny but I can't continue so unless there is crime in the world to cheer me up and give me something to do."<sup>5</sup> William Vaughn Moody was undoubtedly right in alleging that "he likes a touch of the mortuary about," but Robinson—who could spot a Job's comforter when he saw him—twitted "Von Moody, the pessimist man-child."

Robinson could be glum about the world's business, but he did listen for a mellifluous Voice, he did grope toward an apocalyptic Light. These culls from the notes to his nieces reflect both extremes of his spectrum:

After all there isn't anything in life much better than making life better for others—though maybe I ought to be shot for saying anything so easy and so commonplace. . . (6/3/20)

[I] wish all joy to the new arrival. Sometimes I am sorry to see them arrive, but not in this instance. You seem to be happy, and I believe you are. (6/2/24)

I hope you will both have a happy new year, or as happy a one as may reasonably be expected in an imperfect world. (12/21/26)

I haven't yet decided as to just what happiness is. It may be not being run over by a taxicab. (12/31/27)

I am sorry to learn that David's tonsils are coming out, though he will be better off without them. Sometimes I wonder if we shouldnt all be better off with our hearts and brains removed, but that is mostly when I'm having lumbago. (10/20/30)

[The apples] took me back into the past—where as a rule I don't go—though there are a few pleasant spots in it. (11/25/30)

I was glad . . . to learn that you have all been singing. Perhaps you had better train your voices for the coming year—though will hope it won't be so bad as many seem to think. (1/10/33)

<sup>5</sup> Ridgely Torrence (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 62.

By no stretch of the word's meaning could Robinson be called a *happy* man. He confided to Amy Lowell that in his boyhood he wondered hours on end why he had ever been born. To Barbara's query, "What is a skinic?" Uncle Win responded gravely, "A cynic is one who laughs at life." Life was funny, of course, but only fools laughed outright.

4. *His absolute dedication to the writing of poetry.*

In the *Colophon* of December 1930, Robinson revealed that he "was doomed, or elected, or sentenced for life, to the writing of poetry," but he seemed remarkably unruffled by this dour manifest. "If I thought I could write something that would go on living after I'm gone," he said to his sister-in-law Emma, "I'd be satisfied with an attic and a crust all my life." His closest mentor, Dr. A. T. Schumann, recognized the affliction at an early stage. "I guess you will have to write or starve," he told young Robinson when he was irresolutely casting about for a way to earn a living.

Typically, he adopted an oblique attitude toward his *furor scribendi*. "My best wishes to you on the arrival of David," he wrote to Ruth (January 20, 1923). "I am glad you have him, and have no particular advice to offer—except, of course, to drown him if he shows any inclination to write poetry." Nine years later he intoned imploringly, "I hope he isn't going to write poetry." And on April 24, 1932: "I suppose David is now a little too large to drown, but if he writes poetry, you can point to his uncle as a horrible example."<sup>6</sup>

But in the gloomier mood which led Robinson to proclaim "a poet's trade is a martyr's trade," he made this deposition on some poems of a friend of Marie's:

I am sorry always to see anyone starting on that long, dark road that generally don't lead anywhere. I cannot think of anything to suggest except abstinence or surrender. If your friend cannot keep herself from writing poetry, she will have to write it. There is nothing to do so far as I know but to send things out—*ad infinitum*—as I did, in vain, for

<sup>6</sup> David Nivison denies ever inditing a metrical line, but his mother maintains that he once wrote an ode to the interior of a drainpipe. "The first and last, then!" says David, emphatically. (He is the author of the first article in this issue.)

On the birth of Hagedorn's son Oakley, Robinson expostulated in similar vein. "May he live long . . . and not have to write."

more than twelve years. If your friend tries it for say three years, she may have better luck, or possibly better judgment. (October 23, 1931).

One of Robinson's proudest statements on his deathbed was, "I've never scamped my work."

Although he discounted himself as "a draggled-tailed poet," Robinson was not averse to laudations of his work, just so long as they were not effervescent or spoken to his face. In June 1920 he recorded his reaction to a New York *Times* reporter. "I liked young What's-his-name and enjoyed talking with him. He didn't call me any such names as his sister reports, but I appreciate his high opinion." And in October 1930 he thanked Ruth for a critique she had sent him. "I wish the writer hadn't laid my greatness on quite so thick, but don't tell him that I said so." He considered himself "cursed with the poetical microbe," but all was not virulence. Now and again the unavoidable medicine had a pleasant tang.

5. *His consistent solicitude for others.*

Beneath the impregnable faint smile that Robinson wore as a mask to the world lay an immense sensitivity too easily wounded to wear on his sleeve. He was soft to a fault and suffered with uncommon earnestness the arrows leveled at those he loved. He deplored the general disesteem of his brother in Gardiner, assuring Ruth "it is barely possible that there are some who may not quite realize that Dean's unfortunate infirmities had no relation whatever to the fineness of his character. If he hadn't been so fine, he might be alive now and thriving [September 4, 1930]."

Fairly incommunicative and given to long lapses between letters, he was reduced to unendurable anxiety when Ruth failed to write. "I hope your silence doesn't mean that you are having any more trouble. Please let me know." His concern was not for himself but for her.

It perturbed him to learn that other people underwent moments of uneasiness in his behalf. There were so many legitimate candidates for compassion in the world, why worry about him? When in 1931 Ruth expressed her desire to see him over a rough spot, he told her to stop troubling her head: "There are people concealed somewhere who are still reading

blank verse." Again, in 1935, he protested her efforts to relieve him. "My losses are not so very great and do not affect me for the present. Please don't mind my returning your check—with full appreciation of your motive, which just happens to be a mistaken one."

Twice he admonished her not to be scared, the second time (January 6, 1935) finding him in New York Hospital. "I am here only for a general examination for what I thought was colitis. I shall not know until after the real party—which begins tomorrow." Then he blandly changed the subject. "This new building is palatial and has a corner room on the 17th floor with the whole town to look at. I can smoke and read some detective stories—so it isn't so bad. I'll let you know as soon as there is anything to tell." Through the next three weeks he passed from ignorance of his true condition to courageous confrontation of a dread possibility. If at any instant during this period he suspected the real nature of his illness, he dismissed it with wilful lightness, so desirous was he to spare his family's feelings. He forbade Ruth, a registered nurse, to attend him; she was needed more in her own home, he decreed. His last letter to her from the hospital, dated simply "Friday evening," tried desperately to take the sting out of the matter. "I don't dread the operation Monday morning half so much as I do the lying still afterwards." Not three months later, Edwin Arlington Robinson died from cancer of the pancreas.



*"Give me the Truth,  
And let the system go."*

E. A. ROBINSON

## ◆ Editor's Epilogue ◆

**Bouquet:** A wholly insufficient *merci* to Mrs. Ruth Nivison, EAR's niece, without whose graceful patience and vast resource of biographical data this issue would have been far less accurate and authentic. Her initial generosity with the poet's legacy of autographed first editions, manuscripts and letters made possible the magnificent Edwin Arlington Robinson Treasure Room in the Colby College Library.

**Who's Who:** Dr. David S. Nivison, grandnephew of EAR and Harvard Phi Beta Kappa, is Associate Professor of Chinese and Philosophy at Stanford University. He has authored several articles on Chinese thought and a forthcoming biography of the 18th-century Chinese philosopher and historian, Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng; is co-editor of *Confucianism in Action*, published by Stanford in 1959.

Maurice F. Brown, Assistant Professor of English at Colby, wrote his doctoral dissertation at Harvard about four poets who were at the college in the early nineties: William Vaughn Moody, George Santayana, Trumbull Stickney and George Cabot Lodge. His article on Santayana's American roots appeared recently in the *New England Quarterly*.

**Moodier and moodier:** Professor Brown points out that we are concurrently observing a golden as well as a silver jubilee. Moody was also born in 1869 but died in 1910, twenty-five years before Robinson and, if arithmetic serves, precisely fifty years ago.

**Adscriptus:** In the decade that has passed since the appearance of James Humphry's *The Library of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Colby College Press, 1950), some twenty-five additional items from the poet's personal holdings have been acquired. Space proscribes a listing in this memorial issue, but it is on the agenda for the near future. One which fairly exudes associational aura came to us from Mr. Charles F. Adams of Auburn, Maine. It is Sweet's *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* which Robinson used—or rather, didn't use—while at Harvard in 1891. He found the subject so taxing that he dropped it after about a month's tussle with its "hellish" rudiments and mounting eyestrain. The volume is autographed and dated on the half-title page but is otherwise marvelously clean of notation.

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Mountain Waters  
(To Edward Arlington Robinson)  
Centuries shall not deflect  
Nor many suns absorb  
You forming immune and cold  
between your banks of snow—  
Nor any wind  
Carry the dust of cities  
To your high waters,  
That arise out of the  
peaks  
And return again into  
the mountains...  
And never descend.

Lola Ridge

From the flyleaf of Lola Ridge's *The Ghetto and Other Poems* (1918), a presentation copy to E. A. Robinson now in the Colby College Library.